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Politics & Government

Neighbors Aim to Topple AT&T's Tower Plans

AT&T's proposal to erect a 162-foot-high tower at 30 Cobblers Hill Court was not warmly received at a public information meeting Tuesday night.

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Posted Tue, Sep 10, 2013 at 9:16 pm ET | Updated Wed, Sep 11, 2013 at 2:18 pm ET

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AT&T's experts showed a coverage map to illustrate what they say are large gaps in cellular coverage on the northern part of Monroe. Shades of green indicated "excellent" coverage, yellow "a little lower" with good coverage outdoors and driving but a significant drop indoors. Some of the largest portions were white showing signal fluctuations.

"I dropped a few calls while driving through," Michael Doiron, a radio frequency engineer hired by AT&T, said during a public information meeting for the phone company's proposal to erect a 162-foot-tall tower resembling a tree at 30 Cobblers Hill Court to close gaps in coverage.

Close to 60 residents gathered in the Council Chambers of Monroe Town Hall for Tuesday night's meeting.

Deepak Tyagi, who lives near the proposed site, later countered AT&T's presentation by showing a coverage map for Monroe on AT&T's own website — where customers can order new phones — with the heading "Good - Moderate".

"Which is it?" Tyagi asked AT&T's representatives. "What's true? This or that? Does the right hand know what the left hand is doing? If I sign a two-year contract am I getting 'inadequate' coverage? What you tell the public is not what you're showing here."

Kelly Bettuchi, director of external affairs for AT&T, said the maps are not inconsistent.

That was the tone of the meeting as AT&T representatives testified to a need and neighbors in opposition charged it is merely corporate greed. Some accused the phone company of "hiding behind" the Federal Telecommunications Act to bypass town regulations and bully its way to getting a tower wherever it wants one.

First Selectman Steve Vavrek, who has been in talks with AT&T representatives and neighboring residents, arranged and moderated Tuesday night's public information meeting. It was part of a municipal referral process.

Town officials in attendance included Planning Administrator Will Agresta and Planning & Zoning Commission Chairman Patrick O'Hara.

After the municipal referral, in which AT&T provides information and town officials and residents ask questions and provide input, AT&T may bring a formal application to the Connecticut Siting Council, which has sole jurisdiction over the siting of cellular towers.

AT&T's wants to erect the tower on an undeveloped 36-acre parcel at 30 Cobblers Hill Court. The property is being leased from the owner, Quarry Ridge Associates, LLC.

It would be within a 75' X 75 fenced compound within a 100' by 100' area with access from Cobblers Hill Court via a new 12-foot-wide, 1,634-foot long gravel driveway. This would provide vehicle access for maintenance of the tower, its generator and other equipment.

A Long Process

Dan Lichvar of Mustang Drive said 140 neighbors signed a petition in opposition to a tower being located at 30 Cobblers Hill Court.

The first selectman said town officials shared other options, including some town-owned land, with AT&T.

Bettuchi asked members of the audience who know of alternative sites they think will be better to get the addresses to Vavrek, who will forward the information to her.

"If there's another option out there, a piece of property we didn't look at, we're open to that," she said.

John Babina, a founder of WMNR Fine Arts Radio in town, told everyone about two existing towers at the corner of Pastors Walk and Guinea Road and of another atop a hill across the street from Clock Tower Square on Main Street.

He said carriers must locate on an existing tower whenever possible, before proposing its own tower, regardless of cost. This is so towers won't be built all over the place.

Both Vavrek and Bettuchi told residents the meeting was the start of a long process.

Starting from August, AT&T could not submit an application to the Siting Council for at least 90 days and two public notices must be published in a local newspaper prior to filing. After it's filed, the Siting Council will hold a public hearing in Monroe before rendering a decision.

Dropping AT&T's Call for a Tower

AT&T's experts spoke of the rapid increase in households opting against having a land line in favor of cell phones — 35.8 percent. How 70 percent of all 9-1-1 calls are made with a wireless device. And about the capability for police to locate people lost in the woods or injured in an accident by following the cell signal.

They gave a presentation on the "unreliable" coverage areas, how a temporary antenna has to be used at the Chalk Hill School campus on Fan Hill Road.

They said they considered other sites in the area before narrowing it down to 30 Cobblers Hill Court.

In a presentation on health effects, Doiron showed this conclusion: "AT&T's proposed antenna installation is calculated to be within 9.32% of FCC standard for general public/uncontrolled maximum permissible exposure (MPE)."

But neighbors weren't buying any of it.

'Oh God!'

When a computer rendering showed the tower jutting up over a line of trees groans could be heard in the audience. "Oh God!" a woman's was heard saying.

When Dean Gustafson, a senior wetlands scientist hired by AT&T, said a person monitored the balloon Tuesday to ensure it maintained the height the tower would be, several audience members shouted, "That's not true!"

For Dan Lichvar, it comes down to his home's property value.

"My wife and I invested our life savings in our home," he said. "We could lose it all. Ten to 20 percent, the closer you are to a cell tower, the biggest loss for your home."

Deepak Tyagi asked Lucia Chiocchio, an attorney hired by AT&T, if she would move into the Monroe neighborhood with her family if the tower was there.

"It's not relevant," she replied.

"Yes it's relevant!" some audience members called out.

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